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**Between Looking and Gesturing, Pierre Hébert's concept of 'Animation  
d'observation'**

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**Abstract**

The French Canadian filmmaker Pierre Hébert expression 'animation d'observation' (literally, observation animation) first appears within the context of the production of his film ETIENNE ET SARA (1984) and is only employed there and during the implementation of the following project: SONGS AND DANCES OF THE INANIMATE WORLD: THE SUBWAY / LE METRO, CHANTS ET DANSES DU MONDE INANIME (1985). At that time, Hébert's poetics go through what is perhaps their most important transformation. ETIENNE ET SARA, started out being the last in a series of films whose project should have been resolved in a collation of multiple graphic and moving expressions, i.e. within the scope of what we commonly call the 'techniques' of the animated film. However, following Pierre Hébert's meeting with the Belgian poet Serge Meurant, it became evident that it was more than just a film. In CONFITURES DE GAGAKU (1986), the following production to THE SUBWAY, where for the first time he is animating in the presence of the spectators, in dialogue with the saxophonist Jean Derome, the film already appears clearly as a manifestation – albeit an autonomous one – of a project which is formed in a situation of open frontiers in the collision of languages, in a precise time and space. In it the author exhibits and lays claim to the origin of the film for the body, alive and feeling, of its maker, thereby questioning the ideological workings of the whole film making machinery and protocols.

In this essay I will try to explain the author intention when he invented and then used such verbal device within the context of his work and, broadly, that of contemporary animation.

**Introduction**

Whoever attempts to address the simultaneously theoretical and artistic cinematographic work of Pierre Hébert, soon realises that it is marked by a permanent restlessness. Although it is possible to find recurring elements, both at the level of content

and in the coding methods, as well as points of familiarity between some of the films, it is clear that his trajectory seems never to have settled on any formal solutions, whether technical, narrative or other. This observation is rendered self evident when we compare the body of work realised under the aegis of the *National Film Board / Office National du Film*, of Canada, with that manifestly developed later, after his leaving. There is a leap, an apparently incomprehensible difference that brings us to the point of actually questioning his recent work as cinema. Or alternatively, and adopting the point of view of the questions raised by his work, the current dominant conception of cinema itself.

What Pierre Hébert is doing now is something that dwells undoubtedly between languages and technologies, having feeling and gesturing bodies (his own and that of spectators, musicians, dancers, or singers) to experience his work as a presence: ‘Living Cinema’<sup>1</sup>, animated films performed live on stage or among spectators and always in dialogue with other artists. For those who haven’t followed the poetic evolution of Pierre Hébert’s work, this could just be taken as another multimedia performance among many. What I will try to explain in this essay is when and how the transformation took place and, in a particular way, was built, produced by the author. I intend to establish a hypothesis that allows for an understanding of the body of his film and speculative work as a coherent evolution and, at the same time, pinpoint the moment of change.

It is my conviction that it happened through the use of a verbal device invented by the author himself. The expression ‘animation d’observation’ (literally, observation animation) first appears within the context of the production of the film *ETIENNE ET SARA* (1984) and is only employed there and during the implementation of the following project: *LE METRO, CHANTS ET DANSES DU MONDE INANIME / SONGS AND DANCES OF THE INANIMATE WORLD: THE SUBWAY* (1985). At that time, Pierre Hébert’s poetics go through what is perhaps their most important transformation. In the following production, *CONFITURES DE GAGAKU* (1986), he is animating in the presence of the spectators for the first time, in dialogue with the saxophonist Jean Derome. In it the film already appears as a manifestation – albeit an autonomous one – of a project which is formed in a situation of open frontiers in the collision of languages, in a precise time and space.

Before we examine this particular transformation in detail, we had better have some idea about Pierre Hébert previous work.

During his education in Anthropology (at the University of Montréal) in the 60’s, he managed to make a few small independent films. At the same time he was practicing

engraving at the 'Atelier libre de recherché graphique' with Richard Lacroix. The gesture of scratching into a surface, which is at the essence of this technique, will remain the foundation of all his written and cinematic questioning through film.

He will join the *National Film Board*' Animation Studio in 1965, following his interests on Norman McLaren's approach towards filmmaking. His first film there was the experimental work OP HOP – HOP OP, which was awarded the grand prize for short films at the Canadian Film Festival in 1967. Always looking for new techniques, Hébert studied computer animation at the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn in 1967, resulting in the film AUTOUR DE LA PERCEPTION / AROUND PERCEPTION. Hébert's films soon began to be less abstract and to convey a social message (PÈRE NOËL, PÈRE NOËL / SANTA CLAUS IS COMING TONIGHT, 1974) or to address political issues, through humor (LE CORBEAU ET LE RENARD, 1969) and then more directly, denouncing unemployment in ENTRE CHIENS ET LOUP (1978) and war in MEMORIES OF WAR (SOUVENIRS DE GUERRE, 1982). His preferred animation technique was scratching images directly on the film emulsion, although he occasionally used paper cutouts and sometimes a combination of the two techniques also with live-action film recordings and photography. Wanting to renew his craft and broaden the audience for his work, suddenly Hébert start exploring new technologies and unusual filmmaking attitudes. Working alive with artists in different fields as dance, music and literature, he start to give improvisational animation performances first in Canada and then in the United States and Europe, some of the most notable being the European tour of LA SYMPHONIE INTERMINABLE, a film/music performance he did with musicians Jean Derome, Robert M. Lepage and René Lussier, CHANTS ET DANSES DU MONDE INANIMÉ / SONGS AND DANCES OF THE INANIMATE WORLD: THE SUBWAY presented in Quebec with the same musicians, and ADIEU LÉONARD! / GOODBYE LEONARDO! created specially for the Leonardo da Vinci exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. The concern of this essay is to explain the circumstances and means of this particular and definitive change.

What Pierre Hébert is doing now *is* cinema and *is* animation but has little to do with the usual predominant concepts of film that we are used to. Cinema is changing, arts are changing, aesthetics is changing. Cinema technology and industry are no longer respecting the same protocols and standards. Our entire society is different from that which was contemporaneous to the invention and evolution of industrial cinema. Pierre Hébert's recent work affects an astonishing coherence within the context of contemporary artistic practices, thereby forcing us to consider the cinematographic production with a

certain distance. His work presents us with the most varied circles of activity – international art, music, dance encounters and displays, ... – and simultaneously reclaims all of the languages and technologies, putting them in collision without ever rejecting its origins within that particular point from which all animated films grow and cinema is questioned, as he states quoting Hervé Joubert-Laurencin<sup>2</sup>.

In the process of questioning those which were the common, unquestioned technical means and languages, he had to gain distance from concepts, protocols, routines, while avoiding the risk of falling into schematism. For that, he had to be anchored into something other than the terms of the change itself. He used the expression ‘animation d'observation’ only in those two years, while he was working on those two films which, already, were more than just films in the traditional sense. When the change was accomplished he forgot about it but, then, the core of his work was already growing far beyond festivals and studios. His feature film LA PLANTE HUMAINE appears to be a statement closing his contract with a certain kind of animation. A poetic attitude from which he had become emancipated. After that he also left NFB/ONF and what was already a bright and successful career as a director, producer and head of studio.

## Context

The following words can be read in the description of the production project of the film ETIENNE ET SARA, in one of the NFB/ONF memoranda:

«A calligraphy on the body of my son. Scratched on film and graffiti on paper, in small format, almost black and white, a rough animation, ‘observation animation’ on the minute to minute (as we say "day to day") life of a 16-month-old child. Hence, a happy poem with a certain gravity about the ageing of the human body.»<sup>3</sup>

In the film guide, Pierre Hébert makes his intentions clear:

«From the technical point of view, I want to explore the relationship between the animated subject and the likewise animated space, establishing a tension between the lines taken in their autonomous plastic existence, spread out over the screen's surface and, at times, on the limit of optical explosion, and these same lines taken in their representative function, the same tension linking and opposing representation of the subject and representation of the space.»

And he adds:

«The subject matter of the film is therefore the difficulty of simultaneously considering our children and the world, the affirmation of the desire to live and the discomfort of living with sang-froid in the face of chaos, the effort not to turn away one's eyes. The third birth is, therefore, my own and it is never resolved (I

myself, like Étienne, with a still diffused identity, in the face of a still vague world vision, in a still fragmented time-span).»<sup>4</sup>

The expression ‘observation animation’ will also be used during the production of *LE METRO, CHANTS ET DANSES DU MONDE INANIME* (1985)<sup>5</sup>. In the proposal<sup>6</sup> presented by the author to the NFB/ONF, one can read the following:

«Theme: observation of the metro, or rather, observation of the people on the metro.

[This theme] follows on from the research for my previous work: it makes use of the resources of animation to create representations of the most common situations in everyday life, in order to transfigure them, thereby provoking in the spectator a different viewpoint. Thus, above and beyond this effort of ‘observation animation’ (as one might say observation drawing), it deals with attributing a metaphorical and expressive representation to the aggressive relations between people in the public places in large cities (‘aggression’ in this context is taken as being the exacerbated refusal of any relation). In this sense, the metro becomes an interesting framework: people who don't know each other meet in a closed space and are thrown into a tunnel at full speed. Together they go to some/no place in a completely abstract space in the absence of any natural landscape or even pre-existing space (there are windows in the metro, but nothing to see). The bodies immobilised in poses and the blank looks express this extreme aggression which is not the reaching out for a certain contact, but the refusal of all contact, an attempt to wipe out the other or to wipe out the self before the other. This triad of immobility/aggression/abstract space thus constitutes the starting point and the connection lead of my work.»

## Languages

ETIENNE ET SARA, started out being the last in a series of films whose project should have been resolved in a collation of multiple graphic and moving expressions, i.e. within the scope of what we commonly call the ‘techniques’ of the animated film. However, following Pierre Hébert's meeting with the Belgian poet Serge Meurant, it became evident that it was more than just a film. The film and the book<sup>7</sup> resulting from their joint collaboration emerge as autonomous and inseparable manifestations of the original experience and transcend, obviously, the normal production expectations. ‘Conversation of languages’<sup>8</sup> between poetry and film, which does not exclude the suggestion of a similar relationship with music - created ‘in parallel’<sup>9</sup> and presented at the same level as the other two - and which sets out a space of open relations between different expressive media, as a place from which the new poetics of Pierre Hébert will emerge.

ÉTIENNE ET SARA also marks the start of Pierre Hébert's production of theoretical texts in which he investigates the nature of the gesture of animating. The theoretical discourse appears as a necessary process for reflection on his own practice as a film maker, as a means of distancing himself from and confronting the codification modes and models; the support and distribution devices which are part of the film industry.

Surprised by the state of intense creativity and availability which informed the musical improvisation work for ÉTIENNE ET SARA, Pierre Hébert moved on to a collaboration project with the group *Chants et danses du monde inanimé*, made up of saxophonist Robert Lepage and guitar player René Lussier. The decision to take the Montreal metro as a formal element and ambience of the project is explained by the connection between the inspiration found in the noise of domestic machinery, which motivates the group, and the interest in public places and anonymous crowds which currently concerns Pierre Hébert.

He is interested in understanding the process of musical improvisation. He hopes that in the course of the project, as he states, the techniques employed by the musicians might inflect on his own work. He accepts the challenge – which was made as an opening condition – of creating ‘live’, together with the demands of the production periods whereby he will have to make a film lasting 10 to 15 minutes in 3 months<sup>10</sup>. The confrontation – in a specified time and place – between different modes of creation, together with the imposition of rigorous and unusual production conditions, force upon him a severe working discipline which, he believes<sup>11</sup>, will set him free from conditioning and widen his resources.

For the first time in his work, LE METRO addresses the question raised by the difference between film presented in its conventional form and as an aspect of a stage presentation. The formal justification of the project appears as part of a distribution strategy, planned by Pierre Hébert, with the aim of including his films in the regular programming of a commercial cinema. On a wider scale, he imagines alternative ways of screening animation films, with consequences in the attitudes of viewers and, obviously, in the customary nature of animated films<sup>12</sup>.

However, LE METRO mainly brings a new dimension: the consciousness that the author has a body, that something passes between the exterior and the interior of that body, and that that passage, that obscure continuity, falters on the split imposed by devices of a technical and ideological nature which support the film-making apparatus.

## Continuity

In a text written in 1985<sup>13</sup>, the year of the public presentation of *LE METRO, CHANTS ET DANSES DU MONDE INANIME*, Pierre Hébert examines the difference between the movement of the dancer's body in the act of dancing and that of the animator's – his own – in its own creative act. He defines the gap: there is no direct, literal relation between the gesture of the animator and the movement seen on the screen - "That which in me wears itself out speaking is not that which is understood"<sup>14</sup>. Is it nevertheless possible to establish a muscular, nervous contact with the spectator of animation cinema, which is essential to his idea of the aesthetic experience? How can he overcome the inadequacy between the forced gesture of the animator over his static drawing and the virtual, speculative movement which flickers on the screen?

Len Lye and Norman McLaren had both tackled the same problem that of the possibility of empathy via film. McLaren did this by propounding muscular memory to control the formal differences between successive images<sup>15</sup>, along with the paucity of means for a greater proximity between the author and the film<sup>16</sup>; Len Lye by proclaiming the physiological development of a consciousness of movement which could be discovered «through the brain in blood, organs, tissues and nerves»<sup>17</sup>. Movement should never be understood as a formal, external aspect, of a mechanical character, but as an expression of the physical existence itself, projected externally and seen as a manifestation of life. Consequently, the artistic activity always presupposes an experimental search of the intensity and clear establishment of boundaries of the sensitive unit: to touch the exterior object with the senses and to internalise it, integrating it into the substance of one's own body, would be to work the most primitive sensorial terrain, in order to prepare it for a poetic treatment. But with what means and in what way? The language making the work possible is also its obstacle. Its trustworthiness, as a system of correspondence relations, is based on its predictability. It makes possible the communication and representation of concepts and objects, but, at the same time, it inhibits the experience and the reference to world states not foreseen in a semantic system which depends upon a preceding codification of the perceptive experience. It imposes models of recognising reality and shapes them according to conventional relations of correspondence and codification. For this reason, the reference of the work of art must always include the process of codification itself, along with the criticism of the devices which determine and regulate it. In the case of animated film, this presupposes the examination of the manipulation processes for the graphic representation of reality, for the representation of movement and for the continuity/discontinuity relation<sup>18</sup>, but, above



all, the questioning of the technical and ideological devices which are at the root of and which support the film language. Now, this is impossible to do except from a marginal standpoint, excluded and unexpected, from which the false authority of the language is seen to be naked. This space appears, naturally, in the confrontation between expressions that do not overlap or translate between themselves, in no-man's land, between expressive substances where a neutral space of true conversation opens up and new perspectives on the world intercross. Contingency, mistake, improvisation<sup>19</sup>, would equally favour this spontaneous standpoint.

The expression 'observation animation' appears as a creative strategy in the work process of Pierre Hébert, at a time when he is searching for alternatives to the practices and models considered to be relevant and desirable at the heart of a cinema of animation which is becoming more and more technicistic and closed in on itself<sup>20</sup>. The confrontation with other languages and improvisation as a means of expression allow him to place himself outside the conventional animation procedures. Theoretical written discourse emerges as the making of intelligibility as a possibility, the establishment of one sense on another which forms retroactively on the fringes of the creative process.

Through the analogy with the expression 'observation drawing', 'observation animation' functions as a verbal device which allows the animation to be displaced to the real time and space of the animator, as a procedure of observation and spontaneous expression, without mediation. As if he was drawing movement and not images. The body of the animator would then appear, unequivocally, as the place between an exterior space which is internalised and an internal space which is externalised<sup>21</sup>; as the intense passage between that which modifies him and that which he is capable of expressing. Proclaiming his practice as 'observation animation', the author physically positions his look and his gesture *in* the world. Improvised animation, directly scratched on the film in the presence of a public, completes the device thereby created, reaching out at the same time to the presence of the spectator's body and involving him in the flux of energy which pours into a poetic process.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. <http://detritus.net/ostertag/downloads/Garbage/S&G-PR.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Hervé Joubert-Laurencin, *La lettre volante, quatre essais sur le cinéma d'animation*, Paris: Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Memorandum* of the National Film Board/Office National du Film, dated 5th January 1983 and addressed by the producer Robert Forget to Jean-Marc Garand; Fonds Pierre Hébert, Cinémathèque Québécoise, Montréal, Canada: «Une calligraphie sur le corps de mon fils. En gravure sur pellicule et en

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graffiti sur papier, en petit format, presque en noir et blanc, une animation brute, “animation d’observation” sur la vie minute à minute (comme on dit “au jour le jour”) d’un enfant de 16 mois. Donc un poème joyeux et d’une certaine gravité sur le vieillissement des corps humains.»

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Fonds Pierre Hébert, *ibidem*: «D’un point de vue technique, je veux explorer le rapport entre sujet animé et espace également animé en faisant agir une tension entre les traits pris dans leur existence plastique autonome, épars sur la surface de l’écran et parfois à la limite de l’éclatement optique, et ces mêmes traits pris dans leur fonction représentative, la même tension liant et opposant représentation du sujet et représentation de l’espace. [...] «Le propos du film, c’est donc la difficulté de ce regard simultané sur nos enfants et sur le monde, l’affirmation de la volonté et du désarroi de vivre de sang froid face aux chaos, l’effort de ne pas détourner le regard. La troisième naissance est donc plutôt la mienne et n’est jamais résolue (moi-même comme Etienne à l’identité encore éparse, face à une vision du monde encore dispersée, dans une durée encore fragmentée).»

<sup>5</sup> Screenings of LE METRO had already begun in 1984. Cf. Marcel Jean, *Pierre Hébert, l’homme animé*, Québec: Les 400 coups, 1996, p.217.

<sup>6</sup> No date. Cf. Fonds Pierre Hébert, *ibidem*: «**Thématique**: observation du métro, ou plutôt observation des gens dans le métro. Cela va dans le sens de la poursuite de mon travail antérieur: mettre à profit les ressources de l’animation pour fabriquer des représentations des situations les plus ordinaires de la vie quotidienne pour les transfigurer et induire le spectateur à y porter un regard différent. Ainsi, au-delà de cet effort “d’animation d’observation” (comme on dit dessin d’observation) il s’agira de donner une représentation métaphorique et expressive des rapports d’agressivité entre les gens dans les lieux publics des grandes villes (« agressivité » comprise ici comme un refus exacerbé de tout rapport). En ce sens le métro est un cadre intéressant : des gens qui ne se connaissent pas sont réunis dans un espace fermé et sont lancés à toute vitesse dans un tunnel. Ensemble, ils vont quelque part/nulle part dans un espace totalement abstrait en retrait de tout paysage naturel ou même de tout espace préexistant (il y a des fenêtres dans le métro mais rien à voir). Des corps immobilisés dans des poses et des regards figés expriment cette agressivité extrême qui n’est pas recherche d’un contact quelconque mais refus de tout contact, tentative d’annulation de l’autre ou de s’annuler soi-même face à l’autre. Cette triade immobilité/agression/espace abstrait sera donc le point de départ et le fil conducteur de mon travail.».

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Hébert, Serge Meurant, *Étienne et Sara*, Québec: Éditions du Noroît, Bruxelles: Le Cormier, 1984.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Hébert, Communication présentée en novembre 84 au Colloque de l’AQEC, *Musique improvisé et cinema d’animation, 2 pratiques en confrontation*.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Flyer for the film ETIENNE ET SARA, National Film Board/Office National du Film, Canada, 1984.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Hébert, Communication présentée en novembre 84 au Colloque de l’AQEC, *Musique improvisé et cinema d’animation, 2 pratiques en confrontation*.

<sup>11</sup> Pierre Hébert. Cf. proposal presented by the author to the National Film Board/Office National du Film, Fonds Pierre Hébert, *ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> Pierre Hébert, *ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Hébert, Éloge de fixité – 2, *Format Cinéma*, n°44, Montréal, 15 septembre 1985, p.4; also in Marcel Jean, *Pierre Hébert, l’homme animé*, Québec: Les 400 coups, 1996, p.166-167.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*: «Ce qui en moi s'épuise à parler n'est pas ce qui est entendu.»

<sup>15</sup> Norman McLaren, *Animated Motion*, 1976-1978.

<sup>16</sup> Norman McLaren, "Animated Films", *Documentary Film News*, Mai 1948, pp. 52-53.

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. Len Lye, Laura Riding, "Film-making", *Epilogue*, v.1, 1935, in *Figures of Motion, Selected Writings*, edited by Wystan Curnow and Roger Horrocks, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1984, p.39-42.

<sup>18</sup> Pierre Hébert, "Quelques notes incongrues", in *ASIFA Canada*, vol.16, n°2, , 1988, pp.12-13.

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. Pierre Hébert, Colloque de l'AQEC, *ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. Pierre Hébert, "Highly personal reflections on the state of animation"/"Considérations sur l'état actuel du cinéma d'animation", *ASIFA news*, vol.14 – n°1/2001, p. 9-13; Pierre Hébert, "Notes sur l'improvisation", *Revue et corrigée*, n° hors série "Improvisation, quoi de neuf?", Avril 1993, p.51-52.

<sup>21</sup> This expression is taken from *The Book of Disquiet* by Fernando Pessoa, a reading which also marked the work of Pierre Hébert.